



NATIONAL DRUG THREAT ASSESSMENT 2002 PREVIEW

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U. S. D E P A R T M E N T O F J U S T I C E

Introduction

The *National Drug Threat Assessment 2002* is a comprehensive assessment of the threat posed to the United States by illicit drugs. The report, prepared by the National Drug Intelligence Center in partnership with federal, state, and local agencies and organizations, addresses the trafficking and use of primary substances of abuse, adolescent drug use, the dangers attendant to drug use, and drug money laundering. It draws on information provided by nearly 2,600 state and local law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. The following is a preview of the full report.

Overview

Illicit drugs are largely available throughout the United States and have an impact on all segments of society, although adolescents and young adults appear to be most affected. Of the more than 24 million individuals aged 12 and older (nearly 11% of the U.S. population) reported by the 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse as using an illicit drug in the past year, more than two-thirds were between 12 and 35 years old. And of these, over half (54%) were between the ages of 15 and 22.

Regional variations in illicit drug use exist in terms of availability, price, purity or potency, and user preference largely because of factors such as law enforcement focus, educational and health programs, and user demographics. However, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana pose the greatest concern for law enforcement and treatment

providers nationwide. Emerging substance abuse trends are of growing concern, such as the rise in the availability of MDMA, other dangerous drugs such as GHB, and diverted pharmaceuticals.

Cocaine

Cocaine, in both powdered and crack forms, is the primary drug threat to the United States. High demand for and availability of the drug, expansion of cocaine distribution markets, high rates of overdose and collateral crimes, and endemic violence all contribute to the magnitude of the threat. Countering the threat posed by cocaine consumes enormous domestic counterdrug resources, particularly since international cocaine trafficking organizations have demonstrated an ability to modify trafficking operations, shift smuggling routes, and improve concealment techniques in response to multinational interdiction efforts. Further, distribution groups, of which gangs are the most prominent, are continually developing more effective and more secure distribution methods to counter domestic law enforcement efforts while steadily expanding to new market areas.

The expansion of crack cocaine distribution in suburban and rural communities has caused violence to spread to some of these areas, raising the concern of state and local law enforcement officials. The level of violence associated with the trafficking of cocaine—especially crack—exceeds that of all other drugs and is largely due to competition between violent gangs over market share, although it does not compare to the level of violence in the 1980s.

Cocaine is transported to the United States and distributed at the wholesale level primarily by Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Colombian trafficking organizations control most wholesale distribution in the New England, New York/New Jersey, and Mid-Atlantic regions, while Mexican trafficking organizations largely control wholesale distribution in the Pacific, Southwest, West Central, and Great Lakes regions. There are indications, however, that Mexican trafficking organizations are expanding distribution operations in the New York/New Jersey and Mid-Atlantic regions. Gangs control most retail distribution of powdered cocaine and crack in every region of the country. Local independent dealers figure prominently in retail distribution in suburban and rural areas.

Heroin

Heroin is the second greatest drug threat facing the United States. The drug is widely available, and the user population is growing to include an increasing number of young people. This widespread availability and increasing use heighten the threat of lifelong physiological dependency, overdose, and death among users.

Heroin from all major source areas—South America, Mexico, Southeast Asia, and Southwest Asia—is available in various locations throughout the country. The drug trafficking organizations or criminal groups responsible for the transportation and distribution of heroin vary by source area, and the degree to which the different types of heroin are available also varies by region of the country.

South American heroin is the most widely available type, and because of its high purity and relatively low price, it is, in large part, the cause of current high levels of nationwide heroin abuse. Two general but distinct heroin markets appear to exist, however. East of the Mississippi River, highly pure white powdered heroin from South America is the predominant type available; heroin from Southeast and Southwest Asia also is available but to a much

lesser extent. West of the Mississippi, heroin from Mexico, primarily black tar, is the predominant type. Black tar heroin is available in the East, and white powdered heroin is available in the West, but in limited quantities.

Methamphetamine

The threat posed to the United States by methamphetamine lies in its availability and the severe physiological effects associated with its use. The violence and environmental damage attendant to the production, distribution, and use of the drug, as well as the involvement of international drug trafficking organizations, further threaten the country and render methamphetamine the third greatest drug threat.

Methamphetamine is readily available throughout the western half of the country and is becoming increasingly available in areas of the eastern United States. It is produced domestically and in foreign source areas, primarily Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Canada and Southeast Asia. Domestic production is dominated largely by Mexican criminal groups who also dominate wholesale distribution and share control of retail distribution with local independent distributors, outlaw motorcycle gangs, and street gangs.

Violence associated with methamphetamine trafficking and use is increasing. Federal, state, and local law enforcement reporting reveals increases in methamphetamine-related child neglect, child and spousal abuse, sexual abuse, homicide, and property crime, especially mail and check fraud. In addition, methamphetamine production has a profound environmental impact. In California, for example, chemicals from large methamphetamine laboratory dump sites have killed livestock, contaminated streams, and destroyed large areas of trees and vegetation in that state.

Marijuana

The ready availability and popularity of marijuana render the drug a significant threat to the country. Traffickers in foreign source areas and in the United States supply users with marijuana of varying potency, ranging from high-grade marijuana produced in the United States and Canada to lower potency marijuana, much of which is produced in Mexico. High-grade marijuana is increasingly attracting attention in the United States; however, use of lower potency marijuana appears to be more common at this time.

Mexican drug trafficking organizations and criminal groups dominate the transportation and wholesale distribution of the foreign-produced marijuana available in the United States, while independent Caucasian traffickers appear to control wholesale distribution of domestic marijuana. Retail distribution is not dominated by any particular criminal group but is handled by groups and individuals that generally reflect the surrounding area's population.

The demand for marijuana far exceeds that for any other illicit drug, and the large user population in the United States equates to steady profits for traffickers. The profit potential is so high that drug trafficking organizations, criminal groups, and gangs involved in trafficking drugs such as cocaine or heroin traffic marijuana as well to help finance their drug operations.

MDMA

The threat associated with MDMA trafficking and use has increased greatly over the past year because of several factors. The growing number of pills and capsules being marketed as MDMA but containing drugs like methamphetamine, PCP, amphetamine, ketamine, and PMA—with or without MDMA—have increased the dangers associated with MDMA use. The spread of MDMA use to all regions of the country and the drug's prevalence among a diverse user population further contribute to the threat. The

recent involvement of Colombian, Mexican, Asian, and Dominican drug trafficking organizations and criminal groups in MDMA production and transportation, and of African American and Hispanic street gangs in MDMA distribution, has increased competition at each trafficking level and exacerbated the domestic MDMA situation. This rivalry is contributing to a marked increase in violence among distributors and against law enforcement.

MDMA is available in every state, and the number of MDMA users in the country has increased sharply since the mid-1990s. MDMA use, once principally centered at raves and dance clubs, has spread outside these venues to private homes, high schools, college campuses, private parties, and street corners. Distribution has also spread, involving more distributors from a growing number of ethnic backgrounds.

Other Dangerous Drugs

Other Dangerous Drugs include club drugs such as GHB, ketamine, and Rohypnol as well as hallucinogens such as LSD, PCP, and psilocybin. In past years, these drugs were not considered as great a threat as other illicit drugs. However, they are now available nationwide and are increasingly drawing law enforcement attention as more communities confront increased use of these drugs.

The primary outlets for club drugs are raves and dance clubs in metropolitan areas and, increasingly, in suburban and rural communities. Club drugs are an integral part of the rave culture, and many who attend raves use club drugs and advocate their use, wrongly believing that they are not harmful if they are used “responsibly” and their effects are managed properly. Hallucinogens are increasingly being encountered by law enforcement at raves and dance clubs since they reportedly are often used in combination with MDMA, GHB, and ketamine. The use of hallucinogens peaked in the mid-1990s and has since stabilized or decreased slightly; however, the increasing presence of hallucinogens at raves may signal an increase in availability and use in the near future.

Pharmaceuticals

The illegal abuse of pharmaceuticals, medicinal drugs legally available by prescription or over the counter, is the lowest threat among the major drug categories. However, increasing demand for illegally diverted pharmaceuticals, particularly prescription pain relievers, has heightened concerns among the law enforcement and treatment communities.

Users can acquire pharmaceuticals as they might other illicit drugs. More often, though, those who abuse pharmaceuticals steal prescription medication from friends or family members, forge physician's prescriptions, obtain prescriptions from unscrupulous physicians and pharmacists, feign illness to receive prescriptions, and burglarize pharmacies and physician's offices.

Money Laundering

Drug money laundering occurs throughout the United States, particularly in cities that have large drug user populations and the financial infrastructure necessary to facilitate the laundering of drug proceeds. Mexican and Colombian drug trafficking organizations are the primary drug money launderers operating in the United States. Mexican and, to a lesser extent, Colombian traffickers smuggle bulk cash to Mexico primarily by vehicle. Colombian traffickers often move their drug proceeds to Colombia by couriers traveling on commercial flights, via air and maritime cargo, or through the Black Market Peso Exchange. Other techniques used to launder drug proceeds include illicitly using money services businesses, structuring bank deposits and money order purchases, commingling drug proceeds with legitimate funds, purchasing real estate and vehicles, and exploiting the gaming industry.

